

# Business Communication and Public Relations for ESL Students

---

*By Mark McElreath and Valeria Shadrova*

Russia has established its first four-year degree program in public relations at the Electrotechnical University in St. Petersburg. Most of the teachers are ESL specialists and are faculty members in the university's Department of Foreign Languages. They use English to teach Western concepts of professional public relations because much of the body of knowledge in this field is in English (PRSA, 1988, 1990, 1993).

As the subject is taught at most major universities in the West and within the past few years at universities in newly emerging market economies in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and elsewhere, public relations is considered an important management function that uses all forms of communication to establish and facilitate understanding between an organization and its many publics (Cutlip, Center, Broom, 1993). The best university programs teach students to recognize and criticize heavy-handed propaganda and unethical uses of advertising and public relations techniques. They also focus on legal and ethical ways that businesses communicate today (Design for Public Relations Education, 1993).

The Russian students admitted to their nation's first university program in public relations speak English as their second language. During their four-year course of study they learn at least one other language, most likely German, French, Swedish, or Finnish. Consequently, these students are learning to communicate as public relations practitioners in three or more languages.

The program is designed to give students a variety of opportunities to obtain knowledge and develop competencies needed in public relations- including speaking, writing, and critical thinking skills appropriate for interpersonal, small group, and mass communication situations. The focus is not only on teaching English as a structured system of grammatical patterns but also as a means to communicating. The emphasis is not only on English as a second language (ESL) but also on content, meaning, and student interest (Quinn 1984).

## Letter-writing Exercises

Writing is an essential skill in public relations. The purpose of the writing activities in the public relations program at the Electrotechnical University is to give students a variety of experience in writing and producing not only business letters but also press releases, public service announcements, speeches, and other public relations materials.

Most liberal arts programs at Russian universities include courses on writing. But too often such courses are very general. Similar to ESL students in other countries, Russian students are not taught practical business letter-writing skills. Rather, students are taught to write compositions and essays with no particular reader in mind except the instructor. A recent survey indicates most

schools throughout the world offering English language training programs for business students do not use business-oriented instructional material (Schleppegrell 1990). While non-business-oriented writing assignments help students expand their vocabulary and improve their grammar, they do not equip the students with the knowledge and practical skills they need in public relations.

The following case studies provide insight into how ESL can be used with business-oriented students. For an excellent review of the research in second language writing exercises, see Krapels (1988).

The specific ESL writing exercises we report here were implemented in two phases: an initiation phase to introduce students to basic letter writing principles; and, a pre-professional phase to introduce them to more sophisticated business writing situations.

## **Initiation Phase**

The purpose of the initiation phase is to get the students interested in the process of letter writing-any type of letter, including one to a friend or family member. The instructor's task is to suggest a stimulating topic that generates lots of interest on the part of students. One of our assignments was to write a letter to a friend about "My first semester at the university." Because many of the students had not yet had adequate chances to express themselves about this topic, an unusual level of self disclosure occurred during the writing exercise. Such "freeflowing" writing exercises not only increase the level of enthusiasm among students for writing letters but also provide valuable ideas for the instructor to use later in planning additional class exercises and individualized writing assignments.

## **Pre-professional Phase**

In the pre-professional phase, more task-oriented business letters are discussed. For example, one exercise involved responding to a letter to the editor of a major magazine. We used an English language magazine that had a section devoted to letters to the editor, and made photocopies of one question-to-the-editor (without the editor's reply). These were distributed to the students, who were asked to compose a sensible response (the editor's response). The language-learning simulation not only gave the students an opportunity to work on their writing but also to imagine themselves in a position of responsibility dealing with the public (Hyland 1993). It also helped them improve both empathic listening and critical thinking skills.

After a round of peer reviews and a class discussion focussing on the students' initial responses to the letter, the students were asked to revise their answers. On completion of the revision, the students received a photocopy of the actual response from the editor published in the magazine. Now the task for the students was to compare their efforts with the published answer, paying attention not only to the substance of the response but also its writing style and structure. One

class discussion revealed that the published response did not use a salutation, that absolutes such as "never" and "always" were avoided, and that the tone was straightforward-as one student said, "neither buddy-like nor mother-like."

Going from the initiation phase to the pre-professional phase, the tone and logic of the students' writing changed considerably. Through class discussion, students could focus on these changes and how roles affect behavior-especially the roles of business communicators and public relations practitioners.

A more authentic pre-professional letter-writing exercise asked students to write a letter to a local business asking for brochures and/or information about its public relations activities. According to current literature in ESL, the more authentic the exercise, the more learning-especially among adults (Arnold, 1991). The visiting American professor, who taught only in English, drafted the letter and asked his students to translate it into Russian. The students were asked to tailor their letters to specific local businesses and-with the approval of their instructor-send their letters in Russian to the companies. It definitely gave the students a dose of reality (Lund 1992).

The one-page letter had three paragraphs: the first explained the purpose of the letter, the second gave background about the student and Russia's first university-based public relations program, and the third indicated that the student would call in a few days to find out when he or she might come to pick up available materials that illustrated the organization's public relations activities. The letter was to be signed by the head of the public relations program, a distinguished educator whose prestige and influence might "open doors" for the students.

The purpose of the exercise was to give the students an opportunity not only to improve their English skills but also to learn about the differences in Western and Russian business practices-including letter writing styles, formats, business expressions, decision-making strategies, expectations, and basic principles of public relations. The instructional emphasis was on both content and process.

The students were asked to prepare drafts in Russian and to submit originals and revised drafts clipped together. The sets of drafts were circulated among small groups of students who were asked to identify the best letters. After each round of reviews, students were asked to revise and improve their letters. It took more than a month, but eventually the program head agreed to sign and mail a large number of the letters.

As students saw the work of their peers in progress, they developed an ability to identify various approaches to writing a good business letter. This use of peer response groups has been effective for a variety of teaching situations, including business communication and public relations courses (McElreath 1991).

## **More Exercises Recommended**

While the focus of this article has been on only a few types of business letters, other ESL applications might include different types of business letters-for example, billing, order fulfillment, job application acceptance or rejection, and customer complaint resolution.

Using an initiation phase that introduces students to basic letter writing principles and a pre-professional phase that emphasizes real-life situations, we have found that business letter writing exercises can be very effective in helping students not only improve their ESL skills but also their knowledge about business.

**Mark McElreath** is a specialist in public relations, and head of the Ethics Committee of the International Association of Business Communicators. He is author of *Managing Systematic and Ethical Public Relations*.

**Valeria Shadrova** is an ESL specialist at the Electrotechnical University in St. Petersburg, Russia. She spent a semester in 1994 teaching business and professional communication at Towson State University in Maryland.

## References

- Arnold, E. 1991. Authenticity revisited: How real is real? *English for Specific Purposes*, 10, pp. 237-244.
- Cutlip, S. M., A. H. Center and G. M. Broom. 1993. *Effective public relations*. 7th ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.
- Design for Public Relations Education. 1993. New York: Status/Trends of Public Relations Education. Foundation for Public Relations, 415 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017.
- Hyland, K. 1993. Language-learning simulations: A practical guide. *English Teaching Forum*, 31, 4, pp. 16-21.
- Krapels, A. R. 1990. An overview of second language writing process research. In *Second Language Writing*, ed. B. Kroll. Cambridge: Cambridge University.
- Lund, S. 1992. Giving your course a dose of reality. *English Teaching Forum*, 30, 3, pp. 10-15.
- McElreath, M. 1991. Using small groups in the classroom: "Helping Atlas to shrug." In *Learning to Teach: What you need to know to develop a successful career as a public relations educator*, ed. V. S. Turk. New York: Public Relations Society of America.
- -----, 1993. *Managing systematic and ethical public relations*. Dubuque, IA: Brown and Benchmark.
- Public Relations Society of America Task Force. 1988. Public relations body of knowledge. *Public Relations Review*, 14, 1, pp. 3-30.
- Public Relations Society of America Task Force. 1990. Public relations body of knowledge. Annotated bibliography. New York, NY, Public Relations Society of America, 33 Irvin Place, 10003.

- Public Relations Society of America Task Force. 1993. Public relations body of knowledge. Updates of annotated bibliography. New York, NY, Public Relations Society of America, 33 Irving Place, 10003.
- Quinn, T. 1984. Functional approaches in language pedagogy. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics. Cambridge, MA.: Cambridge University Press.
- Schleppegrell, M. and L. Royster. 1990. Business English: An international survey. English for Specific Purposes, 9, pp. 3-16.